

Constant: New Babylon as Trans-media

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Abstract

The Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys (1920-2005) dedicated nearly two decades, spanning from 1956 to 1974, to elucidating his foresight of the forthcoming city through his visionary endeavor titled "New Babylon." Constant persisted in manifesting his conceptualization of the future cityscape through the conduit of "New Babylon," an unrealized venture conceived as "another city for another life." This conceptual framework envisioned a communal endeavor characterized by collaborative creativity, labyrinthine structures, impermanence, adaptability, nomadism, and automation. "New Babylon" epitomized a collective endeavor shaped by the interactive engagement of its denizens, the "New Babylonians," within an unfinished urban milieu perpetually undergoing flux. New Babylon was not a concrete urban planning proposal, but a project dedicated to presenting "a way of thinking, of imagining, of looking on things and on life".

Explorations into Constant's oeuvre in the Netherlands initially centered on his contributions to the Cobra movement, with subsequent scholarly attention in the English-speaking world contextualizing "New Babylon" within the purview of the Situationist International (SI) and architectural historiography. Merely tracing the developmental trajectory of "New Babylon," however meticulous, fails to adequately illuminate its multifaceted essence and scope. For Constant, whose artistic journey commenced in the realm of painting, the canvas served as a nexus facilitating transdisciplinary transitions. Hence, delving into Constant's pre-"New Babylon" phase is imperative for navigating the labyrinthine depths of his conceptual edifice.

This doctoral thesis meticulously examines the chronological progression of Constant's artistic output, delineating six distinct phases, encompassing the pre-"New Babylon" epoch. Specifically, it delves into the "early phase" from 1956 to 1963, characterized by the genesis of models alongside drawings, the "intermediate phase" spanning 1963 to 1969, marked by a shift towards macro-scale cartography, and the "late phase" from 1969 to 1974, where Constant reverted to painting post the upheavals of May 1968.

- (1) Cobra prehistory and Cobra 1948-51: paintings
- (2) Neovision and Liga Nieuw Beelden: sculptures/constructions
- (3) Early period of New Babylon 1956-63 (1) and IS: models
- (4) Early period of New Babylon 1956-63 (2): models and drawings
- (5) Middle period of New Babylon 1963-69: cartography
- (6) Late period of New Babylon 1969-74: return to paintings

In elucidating Constant's aspiration to articulate "a way of thinking, of imagining, of looking on things and on life," this thesis advocates for an alternative perspective termed "trans-media" as "another way of looking on things." Derived from the concept of "transdisciplinarity," this approach transcends conventional disciplinary boundaries, fostering interstitial dialogues between painting, sculpture, and architecture. "Trans-media" encapsulate a modality of transmission wherein discrete disciplines converge, subvert normative

paradigms, and perpetually evolve through intermedium translation.

This dissertation posits "New Babylon" as a quintessential exemplar of "trans-media," enshrining the quintessence of painting while traversing the realms of sculpture, architecture, and cartography. By amalgamating insights from sociology, geography, and allied disciplines, it endeavors to unravel the multifaceted essence of "New Babylon" from a diachronic and transdisciplinary perspective.

"Trans-media" embody a modality of "transmission" wherein specific disciplines converge to establish a shared foundation, challenging the established norms as they traverse between them, perpetually undergoing metamorphosis as they transition across different media. This thesis expounds upon New Babylon as a quintessential example of such "trans-media," supplementing it with the socio-spatial theory of the "spatial turn," which originated from Henri Lefebvre's discourse on urban and spatial dynamics, a discourse with which Constant engaged. It integrates insights not only from the realms of art history and architectural historiography but also from sociology, geography, and allied disciplines. Employing a diachronic and multifaceted methodology, this dissertation endeavors to elucidate the intricate nature and expansive scope of New Babylon, drawing from a holistic perspective that incorporates findings from sociology, geography, as well as art and architectural history. The introduction provides a comprehensive review of prior research endeavors, alongside delineating the chronological divisions and analytical framework guiding this dissertation.

Chapter 1 delves into the prehistory of Cobra and the artistic milieu during the Cobra era. The notion of "art for all, by all, and of all," as elucidated in the Manifesto of the Dutch Experimental Group, served as a thematic undercurrent permeating subsequent endeavors such as New Babylon. Constant's artistic endeavors during this period drew inspiration from the spontaneity inherent in children, imagery evocative of animals, and the communal ethos prevalent in folk art. These artistic expressions served as a counterpoint to the perceived sterility of De Stijl's abstract aesthetic, characterized by bold brushwork, a dynamic interplay of lines and forms, and an emphasis on delineation. The pastoral idyll, initially rooted in the improvisational fervor of children and animals during the early stages of Cobra, metamorphosed into a portrayal of the inherent aggression and brutality witnessed in the war-themed paintings of later Cobra, thus underscoring the nuanced complexity inherent in notions of "creativity."

Chapter 2 delves into the realm of sculpture and constructions during this period, encompassing endeavors such as Neovision and Liga Nieuw Beelden. Following the dissolution of Cobra, Constant's sojourns in Paris and London kindled a burgeoning interest in urban and residential spaces, catalyzing a "transition" in his artistic expression from figurative to abstract. Concurrently, there was a paradigm shift from two-dimensional to three-dimensional forms, entailing a collaboration with Aldo van Eyck in exploring composition and spatial colorism. This transformative process prompted a reassessment of De Stijl, previously regarded as antagonistic during the Cobra era. Constant's advocacy for the mastery of materials

and techniques, dating back to the Cobra era, bore the imprint of influences from Russian Constructivism, evident in his sculptural and architectural endeavors during this epoch.

Chapter 3 elucidates the nascent phase of New Babylon during the involvement with the Situationist International (SI). The "Design for a Gypsie Camp in Alba" served as an archetype of New Babylon, characterized by a dissolution of traditional notions of private land ownership and state sovereignty, epitomizing a nomadic lifestyle in perpetual motion. While New Babylon crystallized as an embodiment of Guy Debord's concept of "unitary urbanism" within the SI, discordance emerged between Constant and Debord concerning the conceptualization of models, technological integration, and architectural paradigms.

Chapter 4 delineates the early stage of New Babylon subsequent to the departure from the SI, juxtaposed with contemporary architectural projects by luminaries such as Allison & Peter Smithson and Yona Friedman. New Babylon distinguished itself through its embracement of "détournement" and "transgression", deviating from architectural projects geared solely towards fulfilling extant social requisites. Constant's depictions during this period captured the transient essence of New Babylon, a quality eluding static representations such as models, which merely froze a moment in time. Despite incorporating elements of architectural "détournement," New Babylon prioritized the creation of atmospheric moments over conventional architectural frameworks.

Chapter 5 elucidates the cartographic endeavors during the mid-phase of New Babylon's evolution. Against the backdrop of burgeoning monumental models, Constant embarked on cartographic explorations, fostering a conceptualization centered on scale that bridged the realms of models and maps. Simultaneously, there emerged a conceptualization aimed at transcending cosmopolitanism, advocating for the cultivation and interconnection of collective creativity on a global scale.

Chapter 6 explores the resurgence of painting during the latter phase of New Babylon. Following the events of May 1968, Constant ceased the production of models, redirecting his focus towards painting. The paintings of this era depicted a somber, desolate New Babylon marred by violence and hedonistic indulgence. The trajectory from the early and middle phases of New Babylon to its later stage mirrored the developmental arc witnessed during Cobra, encapsulating themes of "transitional" ambiguity and the inherent constraints of collective creativity. Nonetheless, there existed a continuity between the earlier and later phases of New Babylon, with Constant's artistic discipline of painting attaining heightened radicalization as it traversed disciplinary boundaries, particularly with architecture.

The concluding chapter encapsulates New Babylon as a quintessential exemplar of "trans-media," wherein the five prefixes - "translation", "transformation", "transition", "transgression", and "transmission" - synergize. As a "trans-media" enterprise, New Babylon serves as a nexus where the discipline of painting serves as a fulcrum, facilitating "transitions" across diverse disciplines such as sculpture/construction,

architecture, and cartography. Through its perpetual "transformation", New Babylon articulates aspects that remain latent within respective media, such as models, drawings, and maps. In this continuous "transformation", it "translates" residual elements across different mediums, thereby illuminating the nuances inherent in each medium through the iterative expansion and amalgamation of the "disciplinarity code' of painting, and subsequently "transmitting" these nuances through another media.